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More than a Child's Work: Framing Teacher Discourse about Play

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“We need a new word. It can’t be work, it can’t be play. It’s... *plurk*.”  
--Maggie, First Grade Teacher

In the current educational climate of accountability, many elementary teachers face expectations from administrators, parents, and colleagues to raise academic achievement through narrowly-defined, “rigidly paced, curriculum-driven, scripted instruction” (Stipek, 2005). In order to devote more time to reading and math instruction, an increasing number of American schools have eliminated recess and reduced play-based classroom learning activities, even in kindergarten, the traditional sanctuary of play (Brandon, 2002; Hemphill, 2006; Katz, 1999; Ohanian, 2002; Olfman, 2003). On the other hand, an almost omnipresent heuristic operates among early childhood professionals (Dunn & Kontos, 1997; Fler, 2003) that equates quality teaching with developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), a play-based approach in which children learn as they stack and topple block towers, dramatize stories with puppets, daub drippy paintings on the paint easel, entice a crawling ladybug onto a magnifying glass, or engage in other forms of play. This puts primary teachers in an untenable position: either teachers must defy school policy in order to implement play-based instruction or they must set aside their beliefs about best practice for young children in order to comply with institutional mandates for direct instruction and increased seatwork (McDaniel, Isaac, Brooks, & Hatch, 2005). It’s a choice between fulfilling the ideal of a good early childhood professional (Fler, 2003) or the ideal of a good team player and elementary school employee (Goldstein, 1997). In this article, I examine how teachers draw upon ambiguous language to negotiate conflicting educational discourses and contradictory professional expectations. I use critical discourse analysis (Gee, 1999) to reveal the ideological shaping of meanings, interaction, and discursive positioning as five teachers discuss and analyze videotaped excerpts from their actual classroom practice. Microethnographic analysis (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2004) of teachers’ conversation reveals how the ambiguity of the terms *work* and *play* creates a space where teachers can discursively combine clashing obligations.

At another level, this article examines play as a conversational frame within the teachers’ discussion which enables speakers to produce improvisations to meet the obligations of oppositional ideals (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). Erving Goffman (1974) conceptualized *frames* as interactional perspectives that constitute meaning in social situations. In this article, I use a layered approach that analyzes multiple frames in the teachers’ discussion: individual perspective frame, hypothetical perspective frame (Barnes & Todd, 1995), metalanguage frame (Bateson, 1972), and play frame (Goffman, 1974). Tracking individual utterances and the flow of frames within the interaction

sequence reveals how teachers use discursive framing to create improvised alternatives to their no-win positioning within a work/play dichotomy.

To explore how language ambiguity and play counteract institutional authority in teachers' discussion of work and play, I ask two questions:

- 1) How does ambiguity voiced in cultural models about children's work and play create slippages between conflicting institutional discourses?
- 2) How do conversational shifts in perspective, critique, and playful improvisation open opportunities for teachers to construct themselves as successful?

To examine the discursive positioning in teachers' interpretations of children's work and play, I draw upon views of play as cultural activity (Göncü, 1999; Holland, et al., 1998; Sutton-Smith, 1997), sociolinguistic framing (Goffman, 1974), and critical discourse analysis (Gee, 1999), perspectives that view language as socially constitutive and embedded in power relations. I examine the tension between two educational discourses about play and work that drive institutional and social practices that influence teacher instruction, determine classroom curricula, and shape children's learning: the play ethos and the work ethos.

### **Educational Discourses of Play and Work**

Recent meta-analyses of the research literature on play in early childhood education (Roskos & Christie, 2001; Saracho & Spodek, 2002) substantiated Brian Sutton-Smith's (1997) claim that a pervasive discourse valorizes play and acts as an ethos or moral imperative in early childhood classrooms. The *play ethos* is a long-standing educationally romantic (Rousseau, 1762/1979) and democratic belief in the value of learner-directed play and student choice. The play ethos maintains that play is necessary for children's development and all effects of play are unquestionably positive for children (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Proponents justify play ethos by drawing upon two theories in developmental psychology that have dominated the field of early childhood education: Jean Piaget's theory of genetic epistemology and Lev Vygotsky's theory of cultural-historical development.

In Piaget's (1962) view, children move through stages of development facilitated by their play interactions with objects in the physical and social environment. Piaget (1926/1959) conceptualized play as a means of assimilation in which a child constructs representational thought and ultimately language. In play, a child operates upon objects in order to assimilate them into existing schemas and attach a symbolic meaning. Piaget (1972) believed that play and experimentation could cause cognitive development, where language alone could

not.

Vygotsky (1978) viewed play as a unique opportunity to free the child from the constraints of concrete perception, typical of early childhood. “But in play, things lose their determining force. The child sees one thing but acts differently in relation to what he sees. Thus a condition is reached in which the child begins to act independently of what he sees” (p. 97). Play is a prime space for mediation, a self-scaffolding zone of proximal development, that allows children to imagine and enact more experienced selves, to act as if “a head taller” (p. 102). Mediation of the environment creates opportunities for higher levels of mental activity, which transform the child’s thinking and lead to new development. Play experiences not only reflect development; they serve as leading activities that move mental processes forward (Leontiev, 1981). Neo-Vygotskian perspectives expand sociocultural aspects of cultural-historical theory. Through their play, children simulate local cultural contexts and approximate valued ways of participating in the surrounding community (Göncü, 1999).

Both theories situate play at the center of learning, as a means of moving the learner along a progression of transformative stages.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the play ethos promotes developmentally appropriate practice—age-appropriate, play-based, child-centered learning activities matched to a child’s current stage and designed to advance development to succeeding stages (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

The antithesis of play is work, with all its vital, serious, and rigorous nature. Recent accountability measures (e.g., No Child Left Behind) have prompted a call for increased effort and rigor in school, drawing on a set of beliefs in the *work ethos* (work is necessary for learning; play is off-task behavior that is suspected of reducing academic achievement), which leaves little time for play activities (Blaustein, 2005; Brandon, 2002; Ohanian, 2002). In the work ethos, schoolwork constitutes a child’s job and deserves significant effort. The work ethos values schooling as a prerequisite for economic livelihood: the preparation of workers is of great economic interest to a society; therefore, the end product of education should be a skilled labor force. Work ethos is apparent today in national concern over perceived socioeconomic, cultural, and global gaps in academic achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) and calls for no-nonsense direct instruction and efficient transfer of knowledge and skills pre-determined by school grade (e.g., Hirsch, 1996; Bennett, Finn, & Cribb; 1999). Such grade-leveled, task-based, teacher-centered curricula are described by supporters as “core knowledge” that every child “needs to know” (Hirsch, 1996) but as archetypical “developmentally inappropriate practice” in the early childhood professional literature (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp and Rosengrant, 1992; Neuman & Roskos, 2005).

Work ethos and play ethos represent oversimplified rhetorics that circulate a narrow set of expectations about schooling and childhood. These discourses

manifest in *cultural models* that circulate naturalized expectations within a culture as popular expressions or scripts that explain who people should be and how they should act (Gee, 1996; Holland & Quinn, 1987). For example, some cultural models circulate expectations for a universal sequence of staged development: the “hurried child” (Elkind, 1981) warns against the dangers of rushed development through overscheduling and premature academic demands while the “late bloomer” trusts in the inevitability of natural growth. Other cultural models circulate expectations for achieving a standardized academic norm through hard work: “it’s never too early to start” (Spellings, 2005) advocates “jumpstarting” academic achievement through intensive early intervention in skills instruction, while individual responsibility for failure to meet the standard is expressed through deficits located in “at-risk children” (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995).

Tension between equally compelling but conflicting cultural models causes contradictions that prompt people to improvise their way to a resolution. Dorothy Holland (1998) cites the example of improvisation by a Nepalese woman who felt driven to “climb up a house” by conflicting identity expectations. In order to meet both the social obligation of keeping an appointment and the caste prohibition that prevented her from entering the house where she was to meet with researchers, the middle-aged woman scaled the side of the house to reach a balcony.

Any given teaching approach or instance of actual classroom experience will juxtapose and laminate multiple cultural models and their competing discourses, resulting in potential contradictions, slippages, and affordances (Leander, 2004; Wohlwend, 2007). This research focuses on the tension between work and play, two of many possible competing discourses<sup>2</sup>. The problem of balancing work and play was identified by the teachers as a central tension in their classroom practice as they juggled their beliefs about educational best practice with institutional expectations for increased academic achievement.

### **Critical Research on Play Ethos and Developmentally Appropriate Practice**

The trend to reduce play time for young children has produced numerous position statements and research that revoice the play ethos through calls for developmentally appropriate practice (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002; Katz, 1999). Other researchers have looked critically for the ideological effects of developmentally appropriate practice expectations upon teachers. Carol Anne Wien (1996) observed and interviewed three teachers in daycare centers to examine how their perceptions of the need to follow time schedules affected their ability to enact expectations for developmentally appropriate practice and marginalized their practical knowledge. Lisa Goldstein (1997) problematized the

difficulty that primary teachers have incorporating developmentally appropriate practice with elementary curricular expectations, blaming themselves for “inconsistent practice.” Other critical researchers critique assumptions that (typically female) individual teachers must bear responsibility for reconciling disparate institutional discourses (Ailwood, 2003; Fler, 2003), hampered by societal expectations for feminine nurturing (Grumet, 1988; Walkerdine, 1994).

In a multi-year ethnographic study, Eric Erwin and Heather Delair (2004) observed and interviewed 12 primary teachers who used play-based curricula, documenting the strategies that the teachers used to overcome pressures for workbook skills practice from parents and administrators. The strategies included joining advocacy groups such as early childhood professional organizations, organizing support groups with colleagues, withdrawing during discussion in faculty meetings, hiding their practice from other teachers, and quitting.

However, few studies examine the specific language that prompts such dramatic moves to protect play practices and heroic efforts to comply with institutional expectations. What do teachers mean when they say “work” or “play?” How do teachers make use of the ambiguity created when they blur definitions by repeating the familiar early childhood education mantra “play is a child’s work” (Paley, 2004) or by substituting one term for the other (Romero, 1991)? Discourse studies such as the critical discourse analysis in this article are needed to reveal the discourses that are masked by these naturalized terms and their unexamined social effects.

### **Critically Analyzing and Framing Teacher Discourse**

James Gee’s (1999) methods for critical discourse analysis link institutional discourses to local conversations and texts to discover how power circulates through language by inscribing and reinscribing expected “ways of being and doing.” Critical discourse analysis of teacher discussion groups shows that teachers in discussion groups often face the need to coordinate multiple conflicting discourses voiced by members (Lewis & Ketter, 2004).

Microethnographic discourse analysis (Bloome et al., 2004) of interactional frames provides tools for examining the dialogic intersection of conflicting discourses (Bakhtin, 1981). Research in teacher discourse demonstrates speakers’ imagined hypothetical cases as a step toward hybridizing or combining perspectives (Barnes & Todd, 1995). Hypothesizing invents a creative potential discourse and serves as a dialogic way of “coming to know” through consideration of an imagined viewpoint (Bakhtin, 1981). Thus, hypothetical frames open a space in conversations for dialogic juxtaposition where two different viewpoints can struggle together toward understanding

(Barnes & Todd, 1995).

Speakers also step outside the main frame of a conversation to explain what they mean by a certain word or phrase. These teachers moved to the frame of *metalanguage* (Bateson, 1972; Goffman, 1974) to talk about the words work and play as objects of study. The metalanguage frame provides a detached space for evaluation and critical examination of language and its social uses, political effects, and power inequalities.

The play frame (Bateson, 1972; Goffman, 1974) offers recontextualizing (Silverstein, 1976) facility for transforming reality from the immediate situation to an imagined space, outside an experienced place and time (Goodwin, 1990; Dyson, 2001, 2003). Play episodes are often humorous, as flexible recontextualization produces the word twists, exaggeration, and language incongruities that typify jokes, puns, and mimicry (Sherzer, 2002). In the teachers' discussion, the play frame serves as a space for contextualizing metalinguistic propositions or for exploring hypothetical premises by transforming assertions into concrete albeit imagined contexts.

## Research Context and Data Collection

### *The Teachers-Informants-Friends*

This microethnographic analysis of discourse focuses on one discussion in a larger three-year ethnographic study of play and literacy practices in kindergarten and first-grade classrooms in three schools. The five women in the discussion group are teachers in a school of approximately 450 students in a Midwestern suburban school district in the United States where I had previously worked as a kindergarten and first-grade teacher. (See Table 1 for the participants' teaching profiles; all the teachers' names are pseudonyms.) The constructivist early childhood curriculum (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992; DeVries, 2001) in the two kindergartens and three first-grade classrooms provided plentiful opportunities for child-directed activity in daily learning centers.

Table 1: Teaching Profiles for Participating Early Childhood Teachers

Teacher	Grade Currently Teaching	Self-described Teaching Approach	K or 1st Grade Teaching Experience	Approx. Age	Education
Emma	K	Constructivist	K: 2 years	35	MA

			1 <sup>st</sup> : 7 years		
Carole	1	Traditional	1 <sup>st</sup> : 4 years	35	BA
Rosie	K	Developmentally Appropriate	K: 13 years	45	MA
Kayla	1	Constructivist	K: 1 year 1 <sup>st</sup> : 2 years	30	BA
Maggie	1	Constructivist	K: 1 year 1 <sup>st</sup> : 2 years	45	BA

In prior years, the five teachers and I participated in several peer-coaching projects where we regularly shared videotaped clips of a reading group or writing activity and collectively sorted out our interpretations of the learning interaction in terms of constructivist theory. As a new teacher this year, only Carole does not share this history of reflective philosophy-building, which contributes to a disconnect between her discourse and the majority discourse voiced by the group (Lewis & Ketter, 2004).

### *The Discussion and the Videotape*

During weekly observations and visits in these classrooms, I noticed that teachers categorized a wide range of diverse activities as play and that their definitions frequently overlapped: the same activity that a teacher described as work in one classroom could be characterized as play in another classroom. I used video ethnography techniques (Brougere, Tobin, Santiago, & Arzubaiaga, 2006; Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989) to present actual classroom footage as prompts that could provide concrete examples and generate discussion about the nature of work and play. In an hour-long session after school, the five teachers and I viewed a short videotape of excerpts of children's activity during learning centers within the teachers' classrooms. As they viewed the tape, the teachers recorded their impressions of each activity and categorized each as work or play. I stopped the tape periodically to allow the teachers to discuss and identify activities as work or play, videotaping their discussion for later transcription.

The videotape clips were selected from a larger set of weekly videotapes gathered in the teachers' classrooms over the course of the school year. For the videotape montage, I selected instances of children engaging with materials followed by their verbal explanations or demonstrations of their activities (often prompted by an open-ended question from me such as "What are you doing?"). I included video clips of activity from each type of learning center common to all



the kindergarten and first grade classrooms (writing center, house corner, book corner, art table, game center, blocks, math, and science). Table 2 lists the 20 instances of activity by 34 children during center times in all the K-1 classrooms; average length for activities was 30 seconds. I selected these particular instances because I believed that each had the potential to be interpreted as play by the teachers. All 20 instances met several play criteria (Garvey, 1978) that are widely cited in the literature on developmentally appropriate practice: child-initiated, apparently pleasurable, active engagement, and fluid, spontaneous goals.

Table 2. Contents of the Videotape

*Excerpted from Kindergarten Video Data:*

1. Making calls on toy phones in house center
2. Cutting velcro food toys with a plastic knife in house center
3. Building and crashing towers of bristle blocks
4. Building Lego cars at the Lego table
5. Stamping play-doh with numeral cookie cutters
6. Matching lower-case letter ghosts to capital letter pumpkins on flannelboard
7. Moving plastic letters to match a word on a plastic gameboard dial
8. Reading big book on floor
9. Collecting and writing friends' phone numbers on clipboard
10. Writing letters on a hangman figure on whiteboard easel
11. Writing own name repeatedly with multi-colored gel pens
12. Drawing a birthday card with markers
13. Folding pages to make a folded paper book at the writing table

*Excerpted from First-grade Video Data:*

14. Drawing a puppet stage and backdrop on a whiteboard easel
15. Stamping a design with a paint dauber on a Valentine cutout
16. Decorating and writing messages on Valentine cards
17. Drawing a heart shape with marker
18. Making paper hats out of construction paper and glue
19. Constructing wooden ramps for marble runs
20. Drawing characters, actions, and scoring the results to simulate a video game

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Note: Intervals between numbered lines indicate breaks where tape was stopped for discussion.

To validate the teachers' positioning in relation to discourses, I triangulated the teachers' written categorizations of work and play with their interpretations during the discussion and with video data of their actual classroom practice.

## **Data Analysis**

### *Critical Discourse Analysis*

Since critical discourse analysis relies on recursive movement between micro-analysis of actual speech to macro societal discourses, I first used fine-grained analysis to examine each utterance more closely and to identify linguistic patterns of repetition of words, synonymous phrases, proximity of words, or other linguistic features that validate links to either work or play ethos discourses in participants' utterances. I devised a transcription scheme using Excel software that allowed individual utterances to be coded while preserving the sequence so that the interactional relationships between utterances could be analyzed as affirmations, negations, interruptions, repetitions, evaluation, latched speech, or expansions that signal agreement with previous statements or affiliation with other speakers. Each teacher's turns in the discussion were tracked in relation to the other participants' turns to identify each teacher's support of other speakers or topics, to follow development of particular themes in the discussion (Barnes & Todd, 1995), and to locate explicit and implicit references to particular discourses.

Using stanzas as an analytical aid (Gee, 1999; Rogers, 2004), I organized the teachers' conversation into stanzas to highlight common themes and to identify prevalent cultural models that emerged. When viewed in this way, repeated themes in stanzas addressed key issues of ambiguity of the terms work and play, the pressure to restrict play to comply with parental and district expectations, children's need for play, and the artificial nature of a work/play dichotomy. In this article, I use microanalysis to examine the teachers' interactions in the stanzas that invoked the cultural model "*play is a child's work*." In the context of early childhood teaching, "play is a child's work" acts as a widely-accepted cultural model that promotes learner agency and exploration of the environment as children set and work toward their own learning goals.

### *Interactional Frames Analysis*

In order to follow the teachers' collaborative shifts to take children's perspectives and explore definitions, I analyzed sequences of utterances from themed stanzas according to four frames: individual perspective, hypothetical perspective, metalanguage, and play:

- The Individual Perspective Frame represents speech that refers to an individual teacher's description of her interpretation of the videotaped activities (individual perspective frame shown in unaltered font).
- The Hypothetical Perspective Frame represents points in the transcript where the teachers hypothesized about the children's intentions and interpretations during an activity, e.g., "*Children would think...*" (hypothetical perspective frame shown in *italicized print*).
- The Metalanguage Frame represents metalanguage where the teachers discussed their use of language and its social effects, e.g., "**Plus, how many times do we say...**" (metalanguage frame shown in **bold font** ).
- The Play Frame represents enactment sequences and word play that illustrated the teachers' points, e.g., "Oh, you're working so quietly" (play frame shown in underlined font).

### Tracking a Cultural Model

Analysis of the turns where the words work and play co-located, occurred in close proximity, showed the prevalence of the cultural model *play is a child's work*. Play co-located with work 39 times within a single turn (about 9% of the total turns). Incidences of repetition and rewording often signal a contested area (Fairclough, 2001). Carole invoked *play is a child's work* through rewording, "'cause play is work in the child's world." The teachers also indexed the cultural model by combining co-location with rewording or synonyms. In Rosie's play as work example, the word play co-located with work-related terms such as *focused* or *goal*:

"They're learning through things that are meaningful for them. They are so focused. They have a goal and even though it looks like play, they're still learning a lot from it."

#### *"I'm Having a Hard Time": Ambiguity as Individual Inability to Interpret*

In the opening conversation, Carole, new to this community of practice, immediately identified ambiguity of terms as a central issue after viewing children as they pretended to make phone calls and to prepare food in the house corner. In this excerpt, a boy urged another to "call 911, there a fire." Together, they inspected the buttons on the plastic phone and named numerals as they punched the corresponding buttons. Next, a girl picked up the phone to demonstrate that she could dial her home phone number and then pretended to talk with her mother. In the second excerpt, a boy used a plastic knife to separate

velcroed slices of fruit and then distributed the pieces on plastic plates. Carole interpreted the house center activities as both work and play, questioning whether work and play are separate categories.

Individual frame: C: I had a hard time picking between work and play because there's some of both going on in my opinion. They're playing but they're working at figuring things out while they're playing.

Carole located the source of this ambiguity in a personal inability, "I had a hard time picking between work and play" and qualified her authority as only "my opinion." Maggie agreed that she saw the line between work and play as blurred. Her affirmation supported Carole personally by demonstrating that an inability to distinguish work and play could not be attributed to a deficit in a single person. Emma countered that she viewed both activities as work. In fact, Emma categorized all the clips except the video game enactment as work. However, her adamant advocacy for children's agency throughout the discussion exemplified play ethos discourse. Emma argued that the term play does not describe the seriousness and purposefulness that children bring to their independent learning; that children set and pursue their own purposes and that they should be allowed to do so with minimal adult interference. Her appropriation of the term work co-located with play ethos descriptors: fun, challenge, self-directed activity, collaboration, hands-on experience, and discovery.

#### *"They Don't See Themselves as Working": Considering Children's Perspectives*

The teachers also attempted to see the activity from the children's point of view rather than their own. According to the child-centered play ethos, how the children perceive an activity is a crucial element in deciding whether the activity should be categorized as work or play. When children actively choose their play activities, they pursue their own inquiries and experiment with materials; play-based learning occurs when they coordinate fresh discoveries and assimilate new concepts into existing schemas (Piaget, 1962). Rosie was the first to move from her own perspective as teacher to imagine how the children in the housekeeping center might be thinking.

Individual frame: R: I see it all as play, because I'm kinda with Carole where I think.

Hypothetical frame: *I think they don't see themselves as working; they're playing. They're learning a lot and they doing a lot and they're integrating a lot of new things but they're still playing; that's how they work, which is how they learn.*

Individual frame:            So I see it as play.

Just as Carole did earlier, Rosie used rewording to gloss play as children's work, "...they're still playing; that's how they work..." The move to the hypothetical frame at this turn did not diminish the ambiguity. The difficulties of establishing a credible intersubjectivity with a subject distanced by space, time, and development prompted an ongoing debate between Carole and Emma, carried on in the hypothetical frame. Carole took up the position that children do not recognize their activity as work when they are focused on fun and game-like formats and that play is an effective device to produce more work and learning. She also indexed power by hypothesizing a need to defend her instructional decisions to parents who expect that children work on workbook tasks in school.

*Hypothetical:            C: I really think that all learning should be thought of, they should think they are playing and they get a lot more learning done. I would just tell parents that during play, they're learning way more than what you can ever imagine and during our regular...you know, if you think of the academic piece if math could be a game, and they were playing, they're going to learn more than if you say you need to do this paper.*

Emma argued that children recognize their activity as work, acting as agents to determine their goals. Raising the issue that children may see these things more holistically and less artificially than adults, Emma used the hypothetical frame to view the issue of blurred categories from a child's perspective.

*Hypothetical:            E: But I don't know that kids necessarily, just because they're having a good time, I don't know that they would automatically say, "We're playing" just because we're having fun. And when something's challenging, we're working. I don't, it will be interesting to see what they actually say. But I don't know that kids necessarily put those kinds of activities into little compartments like we might tend to do as adults.*

#### *"This is What the Teacher is Telling Me to Do": Critiquing Teacher Power*

Kayla was first to move to the metalanguage frame to examine the linguistic roots of the work/play ambiguity and teacher/child power differential.

**Metalanguage:            Ka: It all depends on what we think of as work and what we think of as play versus what the kids think**

*Hypothetical:* **of that**  
*'cause they'll think of work as this is what the teacher's telling me to do."*

Ethnographic research with kindergarteners and preschoolers corroborates Kayla's view that young children use learner choice as the criterion to distinguish work and play at school (King, 1992, Romero, 1991; Wing, 1995): If teachers choose the activity, it's work; if children make the choice, it's play. The issue of teacher power to frame work and play resurfaced eight stanzas later within the metalanguage frame. Here, Maggie and Carole enact children's voices at play in the play frame to support and animate Rosie's metalanguage critique.

**Metalanguage:** **R: I think a lot of it has to do with how the teacher interprets it.**  
**M: the teacher sees it or (xxx)**  
**R: cause if you are constantly telling your children, you know, "we go here to work" and "we're working" you know.**

Play frame: M: "We're working on a ramp", "We're working on this" ((Using in-character child's voice))  
*Hypothetical:* R: *they're going to say,*  
**Metalanguage:** **R: "we're working". And if somebody else goes and says---**  
Play frame: C: "Go play with the Legos"  
*Hypothetical:* R: *Yeah, then they're going to be playing.*  
C: *They're going to be playing.*

All the teachers but Emma recognized and evaluated their own use of language to control and delimit children's notions of work and play. Rosie, Maggie, and Carole critiqued a common teacher management strategy—praising children's silence to control classroom behavior—that equates work with quiet activity.

**Metalanguage:** **R: Plus, how many times do we say,**  
Play frame: R: "Oh, you're working so quietly" (mockingly, in an exaggerated teacher voice)  
**Metalanguage:** **C: Yeah.**  
*Hypothetical:* R: *So when we're doing a quiet activity, they're working. When they're loud and they're talking, then they're (xxx).*  
**Metalanguage:** **M: So you give that clarification that it's a play time, not a work time.**  
Individual frame: M: When in fact, they are working when they're interacting boisterously ((laughing)) with their friends.

C: Well, they're working at different kinds of things.

By this point, Rosie had earlier abandoned her stance that all the center activities were play, laughing and saying, "**I have the perfect answer. They're working playfully!**" once again rewording *play is a child's work*.

The teachers looked within their own practice and shared the ways that they title the learning center period in their classrooms: Emma, Kayla, and Rosie referred to it as *center time* while Maggie and Carole called it *choice time*. Examples from their own classrooms demonstrated the impact of teachers' language in structuring children's activity through explicit and implicit word meanings. Here, Rosie recognized and evaluated her own use of language to control and delimit children's notions of work and play.

<b>Metalanguage:</b>	<b>R: But I don't focus on work either. I mean, I don't but when we do newsletters, like they'll say</b>
<u>Play:</u>	<u>"We did centers"</u> ((using in-character child's voice))
<b>Metalanguage:</b>	<b>they'll want me to write "We did centers"</b>
Play Frame:	R: And I'll say ((imitating her teacher voice)) <u>Well we didn't do centers, what did we do: in centers?"</u>
<b>Metalanguage:</b>	<b>R: I mean this is a term I try to instill since the beginning. I'll say we do work at centers, but other than that, I don't really say we're going to centers to work. You know, I don't really put that on it.</b>
	<b>KW: Mmhm. Very subtle.</b>
	((Laughter))
	<b>R: ((Laughing)) But I say,</b>
Play frame:	<u>"we worked at centers; we played at centers."</u>
<b>Metalanguage:</b>	<b>I also let them say "we played at centers." I do tell them, say ((correcting herself)) "we played at centers too."</b>

By the end of the discussion, Emma had absorbed the premise of the socially-organizing effect of teacher language into her constructivist belief that children autonomously determine their own definitions, conceding that adults may, although they should not, affect children's perceptions of work and play. In the penultimate stanza of the discussion, Emma joined the rest of the group, abandoning her earliest stance that all of children's activity represents work. Her argument moved from the hypothetical frame to the metalanguage frame to reject the work/play dichotomy as an artificial adult constraint.

Individual frame:	E: Mmhm. I don't I don't know, I just think:
<i>Hypothetical:</i>	<i>E: This is their world. That is how they learn.</i>
Individual frame:	E: And I think, even as an adult, and maybe this is just

me, but if given the opportunity to work with something and experience it, rather than just be told, you tend to learn a lot more if you're in there doing it, asking questions,

*Hypothetical:* *E: and that's what comes naturally to them.*

**Metalinguage:** **E: And I don't know that they would segment it in these nice little neat packages of this is work and this is play, I think we put that on them,**

**M: Mmhm**

*Hypothetical:* *E: but I don't think kids do that*

*M: They can't.*

*R: I don't think they do do that.*

Hybridization of discourse showed up in Emma's assertion "I think we put that on them," which signaled her acceptance that adults are implicated in language socialization and her acceptance of earlier suggestions of pervasive adult influence by Maggie, Rosie, and Kayla. Although she acknowledged that adult language shapes children's interpretations of work and play, Emma tempered her recognition of adult power by recasting it as an adult artificial construction imposed onto the child's world. Maggie and Rosie immediately affirmed and accepted this clarification and transformation of the adult-as-a-socially-organizing-force discourse.

### *"It's Plurk": Inventing Language in the Play Frame*

Maggie initiated the consensus sequence in the metalinguage frame and moved the interaction to the play frame word play where all participants abandoned the play/work dichotomy in favor of a merged notion of working play or playful work. Maggie, Kayla, and Rosie played with word part combinations to coin portmanteaus, terms which blend two words by merging the beginning of one and the ending of another. Here, play and work merge to make the portmanteau *plurk* while work and play merge to make *way*.

**Metalinguage:** **M: We need a new word. It can't be work, it can't be play.**

Play frame: M: It's "plurk." ((Laughing))  
 ((Burst of Laughter))  
 Ka, R: "way" ((Laughing))  
 Ka: I like that. We'll use that, "It's plurk time".

**Metalinguage:** **KW: That's my new title: Plurk: Playing Work and Working Play.**

Play frame: M: ((Nods with ta-da gesture, hands out, palms upward))



The coining of plurk produced a textual artifact which reinvented *play is a child's work* and allowed the group to collectively dismiss the play/work dichotomy and emphasize a shared belief, strengthening the group's cohesion.

### **Frames as Critical Spaces for Evaluation and Transformation**

Teachers in this discussion grappled with the notion that language determines work and play in the classroom and that teachers use the socially organizing power of language to structure children's activity in very subtle ways, ways that are not always readily apparent even to the teacher. The frames of metalanguage and play acted as spaces where participants carried out critical evaluation of naturalized concepts and collaborated in the transformation of their existing discourse. Critique of power and social relationships in language was made possible by out-of-frame inspection of words through metalanguage. The power of teacher language is made evident in Rosie's example from a shared writing activity where she molded students' word choices in a class newsletter to parents. **"I also let them say 'we played at centers.' I do tell them, say 'we played at centers' too."** Affirmations from the other teachers supported Rosie's analysis that they not only implicitly molded children's views of activity through the words that they used to describe child activities, but they also explicitly directed children's word choice to determine acceptable ways for children to describe their own activity.

Just as the metalanguage frame made critique possible, the play frame made transformation possible. In the interaction, the teachers first used the play frame to embody their hypothetical perspective with children's voices to better illustrate their points. Later, the play frame functioned as a socially safe space that invited collaboration and transformed old discourse into new forms that could accommodate a more critical understanding of power relationships in children's work and play. Once the word plurk was coined by Maggie, the others enthusiastically chimed in with word play and enactments. All participants shared equal turns in the word play, and turn-taking was evenly distributed across members of the group for the first time in the entire interaction sequence.

Playful elements opened up access to more participants by allowing each person a part in a low-risk enactment built on shared knowledge of power relationships in an event common to all our experience: the job interview. The interview enactment allowed these teachers to fabricate a reality where they could imagine the impact of a co-constructed term on more powerful others in the institutional setting. Kayla moved the play action from word play to role play by setting up an interview scenario in the hypothetical frame, followed by her enactment of an explanation of plurk within an interview for a teaching position.

Others joined in the enactment sequence which celebrated the word plurk, playing with its novelty and its abrupt, comical sound.

Individual frame:	Ka: That would be good in an interview though. C: That would be really goo:d.
<i>Hypothetical:</i>	<i>Ka: If I had that question in an interview</i>
<u>Play frame:</u>	((enacting job candidate)) <u>"Hey, it's plurk."</u> E: ((enacting)) <u>"We're plurking"</u> M: ((enacting interviewer and response)) <u>"What do you do in your school?"</u> ((lowered pitch)) <u>"It's plurk"</u> . ((raised pitch)) KW: ((enacting interviewer)) <u>"Alright, thank you very much."</u>
<i>Hypothetical:</i>	<i>C: Well, they'd have to know, that'd pique their curiosity,</i>
<i>Play frame:</i>	C: ((enacting interviewer)) <u>"What in the world is she talking about?"</u>

### *Affordances and Limitations of Cultural Models*

Although this particular discussion was artificially constrained and imposed a presumptive dichotomy, that is, these teachers were explicitly charged here with separating work and play, the prompt to apply ambiguous definitions to actual instances of classroom activity caused them to break down the dichotomy and to question their own participation in naturalized notions of play that are omnipresent in mainstream early childhood education. At the same time, ambiguity surrounding notions about children's work and play created a space where teachers could justify their instructional decisions by combining conflicting institutional discourses. *Play is a child's work* is a powerful, agentic, and elastic cultural model that these teachers used to legitimate a range of teaching practices. By invoking this prevalent model, the teachers smoothed over conflicting interpretations, elicited affirmation from colleagues, and preserved group cohesion while maintaining their individual teaching styles.

However, reliance on cultural models exacts a price. Cultural models set up expectations based upon simplified, stereotypical understandings of complex realities that homogenize variations and therefore have stagnating effects. "...all cultural models tend ultimately to limit our perceptions of difference and of new possibilities" (Gee, 1996, p. 89). In this case, the multiple meanings indexed by *play is a child's work* allowed surface agreement and circumvented more critical reflection on teaching practices.

### *Play as Productive Power in Words, Interaction, and Discourse*

As demonstrated in this microanalysis, play offers the capability for contextualizing the hypothetical or theoretical, transforming the imagined into performed reality. Conversely, as in the case of the interview enactment, play also offers the capability of decontextualizing an event from another space/time and recontextualizing it as a play event, transforming the real into the not-real. Thus, play offers a space with unique facility for intercontextually lifting strips of reality and imbuing them with transformed meanings that indexically reproduce, twist, or deny prior meanings (Goffman, 1974; Silverstein, 1996). Joel Sherzer (2002) asserts that intertextuality is doubly inherent to word play, both as the source of play and as the product of play.

Plurk, the hybridized term in which play and work are grafted together, represents intertextuality at three levels. At the word level, speech play grafts two word parts together to create a hybrid that, while carrying the traces of previous meanings of work and play, expresses a third and dialectical option for viewing the previously opposing concepts. Word play, such as the portmanteau plurk, relies on a tension between similarity and difference by juxtaposing elements that bear some surface resemblance but index highly contrasted meanings (Sherzer, 2002).

At the interactional level, plurk represents a moment in the intertextual process when all participants took up the term plurk, playing with the hybridization of discourse. The sprout of blended play and work is planted first by Carole, tended by Maggie, uprooted and then reconsidered by Emma, and eventually revived in “working playfully” by Rosie. Hybridization occurs as the teachers search metalinguistically and playfully for a way to transplant this notion into their own educational discourse. Carole, Maggie, Rosie, and Kayla unearth the roots of plurk in adult language, an idea that is picked up by Emma who appropriates the notion of plurk as the natural view of the child and rejects the dichotomy as an arbitrary and artificial imposition by adults.

At the discourse level, plurk activates a newly hybridized intertextual discourse among participants that rejects adults’ authority to characterize children’s activity as work or play and instead exploits the ambiguity of these terms. Once Emma proposed the hybridization of play and work as the natural view of the child, it was easily absorbed into the constructivist discourse held by the majority of the group. In this way, the notion of plurk was introduced by the least constructivist member of the group and reshaped by the most constructivist member of the group to fit into the teachers’ shared educationally romantic belief system. Carole was first to identify the ambiguity and the discussion thread that eventually led to critical examinations of adult power. Following this line of thinking, some teachers took a self-critical look at the ways in which they had used language as a tool to define and control children’s activities. Emma’s use of a constructivist tenet, the innocence of the natural child, provided a way to

reconcile the emerging critical deconstruction of adult/child language interactions with the group's more romantic viewpoint. In this way, sociocultural and critical notions of plurk became embedded in more traditional constructivist discourse, creating hybridization, or "the presence of one discourse within another" which provides material and visible evidence of transformation within this microanalysis.

### **Implications for Research**

Improvisation and hybridity provide means for coping with double binds caused by dissonant discourse, as demonstrated in Holland's (1998) example of the woman who climbed a house. However, hybridity and improvisation combined with critique provide means for transforming such situations. Noting that hybrid discourse structures signify spaces for transformation and social change, Rogers (2004) recommends that educators "look for instances of hybridity, and indeed encourage them, as moments for potential reconfiguration of practices" (p. 69). In this case, critique lifted the veil and allowed glimpses of how power operates through language within schools while hybridity allowed these teachers to improvise a way out of incompatible discourses through an invention that kept their teaching beliefs intact and maintained group cohesion.

Classroom practice is shaped not only by teachers' individual philosophical approaches to teaching but also by teachers' perception of their power to decide what happens in their classrooms. These teachers were actively monitored through school procedures devised to ensure NCLB's "annual yearly progress" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), including weekly documentation of skills lessons, academic test scores submitted quarterly to the district, and periodic evaluative observations by the principal. However, the discussion showed that teachers also exercised considerable agency within their own classrooms through everyday moment-to-moment instructional decisions.

Helping teachers to make visible the power in the discourses they use and illustrating to them that they can make some choices about their own identities and the social identities of the children in their care is one way to work toward social transformation. (Miller Marsh, 2002, p. 467)

The power of individual teachers is indexed through another cultural model that constructs the classroom teacher as an autonomous agent who can "*just close my door and teach.*" But institutional constraint is also self-imposed, exercised more insidiously, pervasively, and effectively by subjects who self-police their own practice (Foucault, 1995). Hybridity is a tactic (Foucault, 1978; de Certeau, 1984) that enabled these individual teachers to reconcile their developmental teaching practices with administrative objectives and to see themselves as compliant—and

potentially, when informed by critique, to free themselves from self-enforced compliance with bureaucratic restrictions. Play and joking are additional tactics that offer deniability (“just kidding”) (Sherzer, 2002) that allowed teachers to safely imagine defying more powerful others and to envision ways to strategically disrupt institutional power relations, perhaps first steps toward more active change agency.

Researchers interested in productive aspects of power should look beyond critical deconstruction to the refractive and creative properties of play. This research suggests that the critical frames of metalanguage and play perform complementary functions: language critique deconstructs existing contradictions and inequities; play improvises potential alternatives and tries out their possibilities. The transformational ability of play to illustrate, explore, and invent points to its potential as an integral tool for shared meaning-making, social participation, and discursive construction for all learners, with possible applications extending far beyond early childhood settings.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This brief description signals the central role of play shared by the two theories but does not detail the irreconcilable differences between Piagetian and Vygotskian perspectives on play, learning, and development. This is consistent with the teachers’ mingling of concepts associated with either theory to defend play in their curriculum. Many practitioners of developmentally appropriate practice tend to conflate the two theories and overlook points of divergence (Roskos & Christie, 2001), focusing instead on the notion of a monocultural and universal developmental sequence (Burman, 1994). For further readings contrasting Piaget and Vygotsky, see Bruner, J. (1997). Celebrating divergence: Piaget and Vygotsky. *Human Development*, 40(2), 63-73 or DeVries, R. (2000). Vygotsky, Piaget, and education: A reciprocal assimilation of theories and educational practices. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 18(2-3), 187-213.

<sup>2</sup> For example, work ethos relates to multiple discourses such as rationalism and late capitalism while play ethos relates to discourses of nurturing, innocence, and patriarchy (Burman, 1994; Cannella, 1997; Sutton-Smith, 1997). These ethos are also culturally specific; cross-cultural studies of work and play (Lancy, 1996) in child-embedded cultures (Fleer, 2003) reveal that a work/play dichotomy is far from universal but a product of Western modernity.

#### Transcription Notes

((action))	observed action or interpretation of tone, intent, direction of speech
(xxx)	unintelligible word
:	extended phoneme for slight emphasis, two colons indicate exaggerated extensions that distort a word for stronger emphasis

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